

ADVISING MATTERS: Report on First Year Student Focus Groups

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Advising Matters is a multi-year study of how students at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) use and value advising services and resources on campus. Previous institutional studies of undergraduate student experiences suggest that advising resources are important, yet disparate and uneven in utility and value. Through this study we hope to identify both formal and informal networks of information for student advising; capture student perceptions of the quality of information provided from various advising resources; learn what sources of advising information are most influential when students make various advising decisions; and gather thoughts about how to improve advising. This paper reports on the focus group interview component of year one of this multi-year longitudinal study.

The longitudinal component of the study is following the freshman class of 2012 over several years. An initial survey was administered during fall 2012 to a sample of new first year students. Focus group interviews of a subset of survey participants were then conducted in spring term 2013. This report provides details of the findings from the six focus group interviews that were conducted during students' first year at UIC.

Study Design and Methods

The focus group interview protocol covered nine key questions for the participants that were associated with the types of academic advising students sought from various resources, and inquired about the value that students placed on advice received from each resource. The protocol was designed to reduce threats to validity based on recommendations of Kerlinger & Lee (2000), Kruger & Casey (2009), and Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook (2007). The interviews were transcribed and individual respondents were assigned case identifiers. The transcripts were coded following classic content analysis strategy guidelines. For each question, responses were analyzed and reported. This paper is focused on the questions about the type of advice students seek, how students value advice from various resources, and which advice is most influential in guiding student decisions. One factor that may have contributed to the full participation of students in the focus group discussion is that virtually all of the students had experienced mandatory advising. Consequently, all had an informed opinion about their advising experience.

The Sample

In Fall 2012, a survey of initial advising experiences was administered to a sample of new freshmen. The sample focus group participation was the pool of students who completed the initial survey of advising experiences. A total of 390 students completed the survey. Thus, the invitations to participate in the focus group interviews were mailed to 369 of the 390 **survey completers** during the spring 2013 term. (Twenty-one students who completed the survey were not enrolled for spring term). A total of 41 students participated in one of the six focus groups. The 41 focus group participants closely

matched the college of enrollment distribution, and were a fairly good representation of the racial/ethnic distribution of the cohort. A detailed table of the eligible students, sample and respondents is found in table 1.

TABLE 1: Eligible Population, Sample and Respondents

	Initial Survey of Advising Experiences						Focus Group	
	Population		Sample		Respondents		Participants	
	Count	Distribution	Count	Distribution	Count	Distribution	Count	Distribution
CADA	177	6%	55	5%	18	5%	2	5%
AHS	98	3%	35	3%	13	3%	2	5%
CBA	262	8%	116	10%	32	8%	4	10%
Education	57	2%	18	2%	6	2%	1	2%
Engineering	327	10%	130	11%	28	7%	2	5%
LAS	2202	71%	846	71%	293	75%	30	73%
	<u>3123</u>		<u>1200</u>		<u>390</u>		<u>41</u>	
Afr Amer	253	8%	96	8%	32	8%	5	12%
Hispanic	951	30%	359	30%	122	31%	8	20%
Asian	809	26%	320	27%	98	25%	14	34%
Caucasian	896	29%	338	28%	106	27%	12	29%
Other	214	7%	87	7%	32	8%	2	5%

Study Results

Survey responses were reported in earlier institutional reports. The survey queried students about interactions prior to summer orientation. Some general findings from the survey reveal their priorities as they started their university studies (fall 2012):

- When asked about concerns related to advising issues, students reported most concern about academic performance or ‘doing well in my classes’ (70%), followed by ‘choosing the correct courses’ (58%) and the ‘ability to get into the classes I need’ (58%). A total of 47% of the students indicated that they were extremely concerned or concerned about ‘Access to advisors when I need them’.
- Students reported that their primary advising decisions were shaped by interactions with a campus-based advising resource; 24% of the respondents indicated that a college or departmental advisor most influenced their academic decisions, with another 11% indicating that it was staff from a campus support unit. However, an almost equal number of respondents reported primary influence from a non-campus source, including family (18%), friends (8%) and high school staff (8%). In addition, 8% reported that they advised themselves.

It is important to keep in mind that the students were completing the survey within six weeks of initial enrollment.

Focus Group Interview Responses

The focus groups, conducted in the middle of students' second semester on campus, continued the line of questions asked earlier in the survey: What kinds of advising did you seek?; What types of advice do you seek?; Which advising do you most value?; and What suggestions do you have for the improvement of advising at UIC? Some students demonstrated savvy in navigating the resources, while others expressed frustration with a seeming lack of complete information on advising resources. In the following review of the student's responses representative student quotes will be provided for each response category. Each quote is identified by the college of enrollment.

The kinds of advising sought

In the first interview question we asked students, "What kinds of advising have you sought since you arrived at UIC?" For this question, we were interested in getting a very general understanding of the advising they were seeking. The student responses fell into 7 categories: Regular College Advising/ Mandatory Advising, Support Services Advising, Departmental Advising, Study Abroad Advising, Career Center Advising, and other miscellaneous advising types or locations.

In this first question, the students told us about the formal campus advising they sought, and tended to concentrate on telling us where they went for advising. Some students also mentioned that they sought advice beyond class selection, major, and career. As we expected, almost all of the students indicated that they participated in mandatory college (or what they often interchangeably termed 'regular') advising.

LAS: So far I've only had two advising appointments and both of them were my mandatory freshmen ones. And I had one that was really small, like five minutes, and that was my probation one. That's it.

AHS: Well, I'd say, yeah, I've done the Honors College advising and done the Engineering advising as well. And mostly it was just about classes, class registration.

CBA: I've talked a lot with the Honors College advisors. I think that, you know, deciding what classes to take and, you know, looking forward to long range goals and wanting to study abroad and those kinds of things. They seem to be very knowledgeable; know a lot about different offices.

In addition to college advising, some students also indicated that they sought advising from various campus student support services. The specific support services that students mentioned included TRIO academic support program (designed to help increase the retention and graduation of low-income, first-generation college students), the CHANCE program (designed to assist the campus with recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of underrepresented students), AAAN (the African American Academic Network), LARES (the Latin American Recruitment and Educational Services program, the Asian American Resource and Cultural Center and NASP (the Native American Support Program). It's clear that students visit more than one source of advising when they are choosing classes:

CBA: Yeah, like I go to TRIO all the time. CHANCE, they like keep me on track-- like they call me and e-mail me too -- to see how I'm doing and check on me, but then it's like how are your classes going? But planning my classes, I am in the ROTC program, and I'm an accounting major, so they really like help me plan like all my classes that I want to take over the four years -- and they check on me too, to see like, you know, which classes am I taking for next semester and stuff like

that. So, it's pretty organized the whole time because they're really good about seeing where you're at and where you're trying to go and what you should do to get there.

Engin: The advising that I went to, it was from the Native American Support Program where they helped me with courses, to choose which ones. And I'm currently waiting to go into my pre-nursing advising, but so far I went to my advisor at LAS, the department of LAS, to choose which courses.

Students also sought departmental advising. Once again, college advising was supplemented with additional advising support.

LAS: I have seen my LAS advisors as well as my departmental advisors in the chemistry and math departments. And I've also talked with the faculty at the Asian American Resource and Cultural Center, and they offered some advice as well.

Other students mentioned that, because they plan to carry out studies in another country, they sought advice from the campus Study Abroad office.

LAS: I'm in the Honors College and I'm also in this Global Learning Certificate (GLC) program. And it all depends on what I need. If, for example, I'm thinking of studying abroad I will go to the Studying Abroad office for advising. Or I'll talk to my GLC advisor since they have a global understanding and they know what course I need to register for to fulfill that requirement; that certificate program. And then it's more of a variety. It depends on what I need.

Some students also sought advice through the campus Career Center, from ROTC, from their Resident Advisor, or informal sources like an upper class student or a family member. These sources of advice were supplementary to mandatory advising. The following student response is typical of the students who sought advising to supplement mandatory advising.

LAS: I've seen my LAS advisor, or several LAS advisors, for mandatory freshman advising to add a course, to drop a course, or some other reason that I'm forgetting now. So I've been there a few times. I've been to my AAAN advisor a lot. He's very, very helpful because he can incorporate academic decisions and social decisions and things like that. And I talk to both of my RAs a lot.

One student mentioned the Undergraduate Student Success Center, a new advising support unit on campus established in fall 2012. The Undergraduate Student Success Center is designed to help students progress and graduate with high achievement, attaining their educational goals in a timely manner. The Center is a gateway for campus wide resources and information for both students and advisors. While only one student mentioned this new advising center, we are noting this response, because it will be interesting to see if the references to this office will increase in subsequent years of this longitudinal study.

The types of advice sought

When we asked students what type of advice they were seeking, the responses fell into 9 categories: academic planning, course selection, major selection and advice, tutoring support, improving academic performance/improving grades/GPA, career support and internship information, study abroad, counseling, opportunity advising/out of class experiences.

The responses revealed that students seek multiple forms of advice from advisors. The largest number of students told us that they seek **academic planning** advice. When students seek academic planning they want to know that they are on the right track; that the set of courses they plan to take will satisfy their major, and whether the plan gets them to a timely or early graduation.

- LAS: *I sought advising because I set myself a timeline for when I wanted to graduate undergrad, I mean, I plan ahead a lot, that's my tendency, and so I sought like resources that would be able to help me make the decisions that I needed to make, based on a timeline I guess.*
- LAS: *It wasn't too much about classes, because I was able to figure a lot of it out on the Web site, but it was more of long-term, what majors and minors you want to handle, as opposed to what classes you need for a single major. And I also sought advising in terms of pre-professional goals in terms of a timeline for applying to medical school and taking exams and that sort of thing.*
- LAS: *And then I went there to ask about which classes should I take, like in summer, so I can graduate early. And then they were giving me advice like which to take? Like there are two sessions, four week session and eight week session, so they were telling me it will be a lot of work load.*

A number of students told us that they sought **course selection** support. Many students who sought course selection advice were also concerned about how the courses fit within their larger academic plan.

- LAS: *.... I was looking for more classes I should have taken because I started out really bad, and I already have like three Ws. But I guess it's just course selection, because I want to be a computer engineer. But I just chose these classes and I didn't know if I was ready for them or not. So I guess that's the only type of advising I was trying to look for.*
- LAS: *Yeah, for the types of advising I would say, what classes to take, what classes should I pair together, what classes should I not? ...like would it be easier for me to handle? And if I should stay involved in some kind of activities or if I should drop them if they're like too harsh, took too much of a time commitment, so things like that.*
- CBA: *Yeah, because I'm a pre-med major I talk to my advisor about how to lay out my classes so I could take all the classes I needed to take my MCATs and what will be the best way, like efficient way to take them, like taking them all at UIC or taking them at another college in the summer when I have more time to focus in on one subject.*

Some students reported that they were looking for advice about the selection of a **major**. In the two representative responses listed below, students are looking for advice as they choose between majors related to possible future careers.

- CBA: *Well, actually I was pretty confused about what I should major in too. Like that's been the issue. But like I feel like talking about what I'm interested in I went through that with AAAN, and they really helped me a lot, like trying to figure out what I should do.... I have talked to some alumni people over there they had brought some people in, and I talked to them about it too. So that was a pretty good thing too because I thought like, you know, should I do accounting or should I do communication? But after I talked with some people, I figured it out.*
- LAS: *Well, for inter-transferring I wanted to talk about the curriculum. Because for example, I wanted to switch from accounting to biology or psychology. So I was talking to one of the advisors, and he helped me to look over the curriculum for a biology path or for psychology; because I wanted to go to pre-pharmacy, and then we were looking over which classes I would be taking and then*

how I could maybe complete it in a three year program prior to going into pre-pharmacy or something like that; or just completing the four year track like everyone else is doing.

A few students told us that they sought **tutoring support**.

LAS: Yeah, in the commuter center they had a program last semester, the commuter assistance program. And we basically got assigned a commuter who's already in the upperclassmen. And I asked her for help because I was struggling in chemistry last semester and she gave me different sources to go to for tutoring other than my TA....like the Honors College and the Science Learning Center.

Engin: With the Native American Support Program I asked about math courses and stuff like that...and with the TRIO, for [assistance with] the math classes.

Students sought advice for **improving their academic performance/ improving grades/GPA**.

CADA: I know I met with my advisor because, just basically because, I was trying to get my best GPA. And one of the classes I was taking, it turned out I didn't need it, and I wasn't doing like—I wasn't getting an A in it, so we figured out if it benefited my GPA, or you know, it ended up hurting it. So we talked about like, if I dropped it, would my credit still be the same, how would it affect my overall steps towards graduation?

LAS: So, academic-wise it was more like, should I take this combination of classes? Will I succeed? Will I finish my course work on time to graduate on time? ...stuff like that. And there was one time that I had to go to—because I had gotten a bad grade on one of my exams my first semester. And of course, being a freshman I was like, oh my gosh, I have to drop this class. And my advisor just kind of calmed me down and was like, "No, it's okay, it's just one exam. You'll have many of those," and stuff. It was just like that.

A couple of students were looking for **career support and internship information**.

CBA: I'm in the College of Business and right now. I'm business undeclared for my major, because I don't know what aspect I want to go into. So I've gone to an advisor in the College of Business, just for career advice, and how just to explore it and to see my different options, as well as course selection and to see what I have to take to get there.

Study abroad advice was important for some students, for example:

LAS: So I've got academic advising so I've talked to the criminology and sociology advisor to see what kind of classes or when I should take which class. I've talked to the English one and the Spanish one because I'm also wanting to study abroad for Spanish. So she was telling me about.... what classes to take when.

Another student reported seeking **counseling advice** that was related to her academic life.

LAS: Everything that everyone already mentioned kind of applies to me too. And then I can't remember, I don't know why I can't remember the office, not psychology but the office in Student Services Building that helps you if you have like some kind of personal problems and stuff like that.

[the Counseling Center?]

Yeah, Counseling Center. I also went over there for some advising that also was like school related too.

Finally, other students told us that they were looking for **out of class experiences**, or what seemed to be a type of **opportunity advising**. In these cases the students were looking for research opportunities as well as other resources or opportunities.

CADA: So I went in seeing my advisors with a plan of all the courses that I felt I wanted to take for undergraduate. So mostly what I talked about was double-checking that I fulfilled all the requirements for my degrees. But also a lot of the other things that are on campus too. I talked to them about research opportunities; about how prepared I would be for graduate school with this course load, and about what resources I could find outside of just academics.

AHS: I'd be look for pairing, which classes to pair, who to take, and other opportunities outside of just the classes, like volunteer research opportunities, because I know they have a lot of knowledge about that.

Whose advice matters most?

Through the course of the focus group interviews it was clear that students seek advice from multiple sources. Some students appear to poll various sources of advice before making a final decision. We were interested in learning whose advice mattered most when they actually made an academic decision. We asked students: "When you gather information from multiple sources, on whose advice do you place the most value?" The student responses fell into 6 categories: advisors, friends, family/relatives, faculty member, student support staff, and myself, after seeking information from multiple sources. Both advisors and friends topped the list of valued advisors. An equal number of students told us that they most valued their **advisor's** advice as told us that they most valued the advice of their **friends**.

LAS: I actually feel like I take more into consideration what my academic advisors say because they pretty much know where I have to go. Whereas friends and like other people, they may have the same career path, but they may not have the same learning abilities like us and so I feel like, when choosing my courses and everything, I take my academic advisor's advice more.

LAS: Well, I haven't had a super advisor like everyone else seems to have. [laughs] I've had just someone who's just said, "take this course, take this course, and see you later"... but next week I have my mandatory freshmen advising in the Honors college, which will be different because last time I just had an LAS [advisor]. So hopefully it will be different and they'll actually want to know what I'm thinking or what I'm confused about.

LAS: Pretty much other students and friends and classmates, because they have the most advice to give me I'd say. I mean the advisor could tell me something but they haven't really taken the classes and everything. So the students would have the best advice; the most valuable.

LAS: I value the advice that I get from my friends, actually. I have a group of friends that are in the same program; we're all studying the same classes. And so since we all have our own network of friends or upperclassmen that we can turn to, it's actually pretty valuable to be able to see from the students' perspective more so than even like a formal advisor's help. Because they can tell you things that an advisor cannot quote unquote tell you, per se.

The next group that students identified was **family/relatives**.

LAS: *Definitely a family member, because they're obviously like family, they're going to care a little bit more than an advisor. But that's where the difference comes in because they're, like most of the girls here have said, that there are advisors that they know what they're talking about and they also really care. They give you opinions, they steer you in the right direction. So I haven't really had an advisor that's as good as theirs, but like right now it's been mostly my family.*

Other students told us that they most valued the advice of a **faculty member** or a **support service staff/advisor**.

LAS: *Sometimes I go for advice to my English teacher, and sometimes I tell her my classes. She doesn't really quite know because she's just in her department. But she usually tells me, "Oh students told me that this is really good course," or stuff like that. So she kind of helps me and I actually do listen to her sometimes. I think she knows what she's talking about.*

LAS: *I would say Medicina Scholars, just because they have introduced me to medical students at the UIC College of Medicine and they've also set up workshops, mock interviews, and I went to a mock interview with them and I found it really helpful because you ask them anything and they'll give you the way they went through the undergrad and the MCAT [Medical College Admission Test].*

A number of students indicated that ultimately, they valued **their own opinion, after listening to the advice from multiple sources**. In their responses they described a type of polling process wherein they collect information from a number of sources and then use the combination of responses to make an academic decision.

LAS: *For me, at the end of the day, like what I think is the best, is what I go with. But I try to take in everything I've gathered from the students, the advisors, the teachers, so like, try to see the pros and cons, and I look at the med school requirements or things like that. And when I pick classes, just knowing what I can do, and how I can work harder to like achieve the grades that I want to....then it's up to me - what I want to do, and what I think is the best.*

AHS: *Yeah, ultimately I think I would have to listen to my own advice. But after listening to everybody's advice, whether it be a counselor or a parent or a friend, in the end, you know what you do best or you know how you can handle different situations. So ultimately, like after taking in everybody's ideas, I just listen to myself.*

Student advising improvement suggestions

For the last interview question we asked students "What advice do you have for how advising might be improved? Examination of the student responses revealed a number of advising improvement themes:

- Students believe that talking to advisors is important and valuable for their success, so the mandatory college advising requirement should be maintained, and ideally, students should have an assigned advisor.
- Students want course and program advice (e.g. what counts as a general education requirement) that is consistent across advisors and online resources.
- Students seek advice across a broad range of topics, and want all advisors to be able to guide students on majors, programs and policies, or to make effective referrals to other helpful

resources. They suggest that advisors have expertise by disciplinary domains rather than assuming that every advisor can be knowledgeable across all disciplines.

- Students suggest improving inter-college transfer advising. Even if advising is good in the home college and the transfer college, they expressed that they fall between the cracks during the transition.
- Students want advisors to provide specific roadmaps to navigate academic policies. (i.e., If I drop a course, how will it affect my financial aid?)
- Students want to know that advisors care about their academic success. Students told us that, generally, the campus advisors are more caring and helpful than they expected they would be. However, when they expressed concerns about advisors, they told us that caring is demonstrated by allowing sufficient time for advising sessions (30 minutes); maintaining the student's scheduled appointment time; having a flexible schedule for appointments; being prepared for the advising meeting by knowing a bit about the student's background (major, DARS report); being respectful and encouraging; understanding that every student must approach college from their unique background; and allowing students to share concerns (when it seems appropriate).
- Students want advisors to have some depth of knowledge about campus resources that contribute to their academic success (e.g., Study Abroad, Student Exchange, Financial Aid, The Writing Center).
- Some students want to be able to see an advisor in their major in the first year, especially when they have taken advanced placement courses.
- Students suggested using Skype for some advising sessions.

Policy and Program Implications and Recommendations

The list (above) of student recommendations for the improvement of advising at UIC accurately represents concerns and wishes expressed by students throughout the focus group interview process. In this section, we add a few observations that were not expressed by students, which may have important implications for campus advising policy and program development.

Through our discussions with campus advisors and with other colleagues we learned that those who hold formal academic advising positions appreciate the broader definition of advising described in this study by our student participants. The literature revealed a more focused definition of advising, that included exploration of life goals, vocational goals, program choice, course choice and course scheduling. Given the demands on their time, we were concerned that advising professionals would be reluctant to accept a definition that would include a number of additional roles identified by our study participants. The additional roles included an emphasis on advice regarding academic planning, tutoring, improving academic performance, study abroad, counseling, and opportunity advising (i.e. research, internships, etc.). Rather than reluctance, advising professionals expressed appreciation for this more accurate reflection of their student advising experiences. They added that this type of holistic and coordinated approach is what distinguishes exceptional advising from merely adequate advising. This expanded role may have implications for the professional development and evaluation of advisors.

We also learned that UIC is somewhat unique in the number of advising resources that are available to support student academic success. Those who attended more traditional campuses were surprised at the breadth of advising resources that were mentioned by the students in our study. They also expressed that these types of additional supports would have been very helpful as they navigated

through their undergraduate years. It is clear that as UIC's history has unfolded, it has included the development of advising supports that address the needs of a diverse student population. While, at times, the campus has questioned the need for the number of advising resources that the campus provides, it is important to point out that UIC's diverse advising resources were viewed by the student participants, and to those to whom we disseminated our findings, as a strength of the advising that is provided at UIC. At the same time, coordination and cooperation of the various advising services is viewed as a critical component in improving student success.

The findings also reveal that students turn to family and friends for advice at least as often as they turn to academic advisors. They also turn to students in leadership positions, for example, resident assistants, teaching assistants and orientation leaders. Consequently, there may be concern that students are basing academic decisions on information from individuals who have no formal preparation to provide useful academic advice. Here, it's important to note that many of the students who indicated that they turned to family, friends, or student leaders did so because these individuals had some relevant personal experience (i.e., the RA is a junior or senior in the students major, or the family member is a nurse and the student is interested in nursing). Rather than discouraging students from seeking advice from these sources, students may be better served if the campus views these individuals as partners in the advising process, and identifies ways to inform them of, and engage them in, the advising process. Examples might include advising resource information sent to parents, or peer advising training for UIC students in select leadership positions.

We hope that these recommendations, together with the suggestions of the student participants, will help to inform student advising policy, process and programs at UIC, and ultimately, improve UIC student success. We will also use the information from this study to inform the next phase of the longitudinal research on advising at UIC.

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